The Anglican Church and Henry VIII

ONE does not ordinarily go to the secular press for arguments on religious subjects, but one of the best points that has recently been made against the Roman Catholic gibe that Henry VIII founded the Anglican Church, was in a recent issue of the New York Times. A writer who signed himself New Englander, called attention to the fact that this Roman Catholic charge involves the Roman Church herself in a deliberate policy of maintaining communion for more than a generation with a Church which she now holds to be man-made.

The study of the case shows that the English Church repudiated the Pope’s claim to universal authority in 1534. If the Anglican Church was founded by Henry, this was the year in which he must have founded it. Clement VII, who was Pope at the time, did not make the slightest effort to withdraw Catholics from the Church of England. If he believed that Henry had established a new Church in which grace could not be found, surely he must have initiated instantly an effort to secure the Sacraments for England, or else stand convicted of the crime of allowing his spiritual children to go on receiving the false Sacraments of this Church. He made no protest whatever. He did not send a single priest to England to rescue the sheep from the false shepherds. He went calmly on, neglecting to the utmost the flock which he claimed God had committed to his pastoral care.

But this was not the worst of it. Clement died a few months later. Perhaps he did not have time to get the machinery of the
Church into operation to attend to English affairs. But he was succeeded by Paul III, and surely the new Pope, in the first fervour of his high office would rouse himself to save his flock from this so-called Church of merely human origin. But not a bit of it. For fifteen years he ruled serene on the Vatican Hill, and allowed English Catholics to make their communions at the altars of the “new” Church, and not only did not lift a finger to help them, but never suggested that they needed help.

Then came Julius III, who, after six years was, in his turn, succeeded by Marcellus II, who died on the twenty-second day after his election. No blame can be attached to Marcellus, who was a good and holy man, for, in so brief a space of time, it was impossible that he could have put any plan on foot for the relief of the English Catholics; although more might have been expected of Pope Julius in the six years of his pontificate.

With the choice of Marcellus began a movement for reform in the Roman Church, and he was succeeded by Giovanni Petro Caraffa, who is described as “the most rigid among all the cardinals.” He began his reign in May, 1555, as Paul IV. Paul was filled with a burning spirit of reform, to describe respectively the party which favoured the Pope, and the one that sympathized with the civil power, in the age-long struggle between Church and State, which only came to an end with Victor Emmanuel’s triumph in 1870, which stripped the Popes of the temporal power which they had so long and unhappily exercised.

Henry’s break with Rome was the counterpart of what had happened in Europe a hundred times in the middle ages, but no Pope was ever insane enough to think that the enemy prince had created a new Church because he repudiated the papal jurisdiction, and carried the bishops of his kingdom with him. And the Popes of the Reformation period were not so foolish as to think that this was the case with England.

Nor did the lower clergy think so, for on the accession of Elizabeth out of 9,400 priests, the majority of whom had served under papal authority in Queen Mary’s reign, only 192 were found who refused to take the oath of allegiance, and serve the reformed Church of England. The rest did just what their brethren on the Continent had done time and time again, even when the Pope had formally excommunicated their prince, and ordered them not to have communion with him. They ignored the papal demand, remained in their parishes, continuing their ministrations without interruption, hoping and praying for quieter times, all the while faithful to the local authority in Church and State.

This was what the English clergy and people did; and for modern Rome to assert that the Anglican Church had its beginnings with Henry VIII is to assert that seven Popes considered it right and proper for their spiritual children to ally themselves with what they now declare to be the schismatical and heretical creature of a rebellious secular power. Is Rome prepared to make such an acknowledgment?
would appear that they must be impaled inevitably upon one or the other of these horns: Either the sixteenth century Popes were guilty, for more than a generation, of a monstrous neglect of a whole nation of souls over whom they asserted an exclusive spiritual jurisdiction;—or, the Anglican Church was the legitimate Catholic Church of the land, and the Roman controversialists of the present day are uttering a slander of exceeding gravity against their infallible Fathers and brethren who went before them.

We are not specially interested which horn of this dilemma our Roman friends may choose to impale themselves upon. That is their business, and we have no concern with it. But we would be kinder to the sixteenth century Fathers of the Roman Curia than are their own fellow-ecclesiastics.

In the light of history we cannot see our way to attributing to them the spiritual crime of which the modern Roman controversialist by implication accuses them.

The Popes of the Reformation period never dreamed of Henry VIII founding a new Church. They regarded the Church in England just as they had regarded the Church in parts of Germany, France, or Italy, when, again and again in the middle ages, emperors and kings, backed by great numbers of the highest Church authorities of their time, denied the papal jurisdiction in just the same way as did the civil and religious powers in England.

If anyone has the impression that the condition in England during the second third of the sixteenth century was unique in European history, all he needs to set him straight, is to read any account, let it be by Catholic or Protestant of the long struggle between the papacy and the Hohenstaufen Emperors.

Or let him ask any high-school student of medieval history what is meant by the terms Guelf and Ghibelline; and he will learn that they were the names which were used for centuries and with no small degree of success he enjoyed a strong, righteous, and beneficent reign of something more than four years, during which period men caught once more the almost forgotten vision of the Church living and functioning in the power of the Holy Spirit.

He was Pope in the reign of Queen Mary, and during the first year of Elizabeth. He was stern to the last degree in dealing with the English political situation, but it does not seem to have occurred to him on Elizabeth's accession to provide for his English children any other ministration than those of the English Church. He died in August, 1559, and Pius IV, the Pope of the great reforming Council of Trent reigned in his stead.

Pius died over six years later in 1565, bringing to an end the sixth papal reign since Henry VIII was said to have “founded” his “new” Church.

The seventh reign began under Pius V. He is described by an Anglican historian* as “austere, zealous, determined, a man of fervour, piety and blameless life,”—surely the man who would brook no delay in repairing the wrongs done by his predecessors to the English Catholics, and who would see that they enjoyed that pastoral attention which, according to the papal claim, it was his duty to give and their right to receive.

Before considering the course he pursued, we must go back for a moment to note that all this while changes were taking place in England as well as at the Vatican. In 1547 King Henry came to the end of his career of murder, lust and cruelty. According to our modern Roman friends he had founded a new Church, and set it up against

* Bishop Creighton, The Age of Elizabeth, p. 109
that ancient Church which had made England the glorious “Isle of the Saints.”

But in spite of all this, the English Church, under the head of Henry’s Primate, Thomas Cranmer, went on in full communion with the Church of Rome. Rome did nothing to separate herself from the “new” Church. She was content to be in communion with it. Edward VI succeeded Henry, and six unhappy years for the Roman religion in England followed.

On Edward’s death in 1553, Mary’s accession brought a brief surcease of trouble to those who still looked to Rome as their spiritual mother; but Mary died in 1558 and Elizabeth, Henry’s daughter by Anne Boleyn, came to the throne with all her Tudor strength and courage.

As we have seen, Pius IV now reigned in Rome. His name will stand in all history, along with that of Innocent III, as one of the greatest of reformers. It was his holy zeal and indefatigable labours that stated that in the earlier years of Elizabeth’s reign all Catholics attended the services of the Anglican Church, “without any contradiction or show of misliking.”

This statement, made by Elizabeth’s own government, might be open to suspicion, but when we find it corroborated in 1595 by Father Parsons, the most distinguished Jesuit propagandist in Europe, and again in 1605 by Father Garnett of the same Order, when on trial for his life, there can be no further question.

Nor was it because there was no opportunity in England for continuing a strictly Roman Catholic ministry for those who wished to adhere to the Pope. Watson, the deprived Bishop of Lincoln, lived on until 1584, and six others survived for many years, free to come and go on parole within wide territorial limits without interference or espionage.

So far as is known, none of these Bishops protested against attendance on the Anglican Church, and none of them made any effort to ordain priests for the shepherding of their people.

In fact, it was this definite determination of these bishops not to ordain clergy which decided Cardinal Allen, and others, to establish seminaries on the Continent, at Douay, and other places, to train clergy for work among the English Romanists.

At last in 1570, thirty-six years after Henry VIII had, according to the present papal claim, founded the Church of England, despairing of inducing the English ever again to bow their necks to the yoke of Rome, Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth and all who adhered to the Church of England. Now for the first time those who had adhered to Rome were told that it would be sin to communicate at English altars.

Thirty-six years! During this period millions had been born, baptized, confirmed, shriven, had received their Communions regularly at Anglican altars; had finished their course, and fortified by the last Sacraments, had gone out into the other world; —and Pope after Pope had regarded it as a thing to be permitted without question that all these faithful souls, hungering for the Bread of Life, should be fed by the shepherds of a Church which Rome now declares to be the evil device of the most wicked king who ever sat on England’s throne.

Seven Popes reigned contemporary with this early Reformation period. They knew what was going on, and they were well content to leave their people to the spiritual mercies of a Church which we are now told was Henry’s creation.

Let it be noted that it is claimed that these men were infallible rulers of the universal Church with the responsibility for the world on their souls. And yet not one of them had addressed himself to the work of rescuing England and English Catholics from the pretensions of this Church which they now claim had been conceived in iniquity and born in sin.

This situation puts our Roman brethren in a strange quandary. It presents to them an exceedingly unpleasant dilemma. It